



INDONESIA INSTITUTE
OF THE ARTS
SURAKARTA



IICACS

PROCEEDING

*The 2nd Annual of International and
Interdisciplinary Conference on Arts
Creation and Studies*

Arts in History, Culture, Philosophy, Education, and Heritage

Indonesia Institute of the Arts Surakarta
October 14th – 15th, 2017

Student Affairs Association of
The Indonesia Institute of the Arts Surakarta

ARTS IN HISTORY, CULTURE, PHILOSOPHY, EDUCATION, AND HERITAGE

Proceedings of the 2nd International and Interdisciplinary Conference on Arts Creation and Studies IICACS 2017

Surakarta, October 14th – 15th, 2017

Page : IV +171

Size: 21 x 29,7 cm

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Published by

ISI Press

Jalan Ki Hajar Dewantara No. 19, Ketingan, Jebres, Surakarta 57126

Telp.(0271) 647658 Fax.(0271) 646175 <http://iicacs.isi-ska.ac.id>

ISBN

978-602-61933-7-7

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Printed in Surakarta

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CREATIVE CONTEMPORARY PAINTING BASED ON THE ICONOGRAPHY OF YEH PULU RELIEF

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Abstract

This paper is a report of creative art research under the program of Researching, Creating and Presenting Art of the Research, Technology and Higher Education Ministry of Indonesia. The subject of this research is an iconographic people's hero of Yeh Pulu relief. This relief is an ancient artifact of Balinese art, located in Bedulu, Gianyar Regency. Visual analysis of the Panofsky's iconography method (D'alleva, 2005: 22-23) is used as a means of iconography analysis with three aspects: visual/artistic characters, allegories, and symbols. The first-year of the study focuses on analyzing the fundamental visual/artistic approach of my new of contemporary painting series. Deep analysis revealed five findings of visual/artistic approach that explore this theme as the newest visual art concept: cutting (imagining the relief like a poster); smashing (the natural effect of the relief being broken down into many small pieces); drawing (incorporating the visuals of a relief in the method of drawing); highlighting (like a macro camera that presents the profile in its largest and most detailed capacity); coloring (using color to make the visuals impressionistic). The research members are: A. A. Bagus Udayana (photographer), I Nengah Sudika (data collector), and Desi In Diana Sari (layout designer).

Keywords: Iconography, People's hero, Yeh Pulu relief, Visual/artistic approach

Background

Yeh Pulu relief, located in Bedulu, Gianyar is an artifact of art that is very important for the history of Balinese and national cultures. Some historical-geographical works or cultural records of Indonesia explain the relation between the relief and the history of Indonesia as a whole. The book, *Ancient Indonesian Art* (Kempers, 1959: 72) incorporates Yeh Pulu Relief as one of the important artefacts in 'East Java' chapter.

In terms of visuals, theme and material, Yeh Pulu relief is very distinctive. The relief figures visually appear to come close to being real; and likewise, the plant tendrils that complement each fragment of the sculpture look natural. Meanwhile, the theme of this relief tends to showcase the everyday narratives, including the depiction of a man carrying a crock, tiger hunters, a prince riding a horse, a princess, a priest and others. Some fragments on the relief also indicate the depiction of Balinese cultures in the era when the relief was made.

The sculpture thematic representation of Yeh Pulu relief is very different from that of Kamasan puppet painting, which first gained its popularity in the fifteenth century. Kamasan paintings are generally used as a medium to describe the myth and the story of the gods and kings like the epics of Ramayana and Mahabrata. Puppet figures are more dominantly painted on ritual equipment, such as *kober* (flags), *umbul-umbul* (a type of flag made of a strip of cloth whose longer side is attached to a pole), holy place curtains, *langse* (traditional cultural performance stage curtains), *ider-ider* (fabrics decorating the top part of shrines), and others. As the objects are for ritual purposes, *wayang* painting tends to relate to the mythical world.

In contrast, Yeh Pulu relief with a length of about 25 meters and a height of 2 meters is clearly different, especially owing to the choice of daily-life themes that tend to reveal the reality of everyday heroism. This is especially supported by rough or massive sculptures of characters making it tend to showcase folk art. The figures look almost three dimensional as they are deeply sculptured (with a sculpture depth of about 20-50 cm).

The selection of the subject of Yeh Pulu relief as the basis for the creation of contemporary paintings becomes relevant in a sense that it is related to the efforts to uncover the heroism side of the everyday life today. Moreover, macro-social conditions with the apparent gap, various social problems and the collapse of fundamental human values, namely mutual assistance (*gotong royong*), are increasingly important to position art as a social antenna. Likewise, problems such as drug trafficking, sexual harassment, corruption and terrorism, should be a mutual concern of people including academician artists. The theme of heroism, which reveals heroic expression and behaviors, as well as the exemplary noble traits of humans, becomes important to offer.

The contemporary painting creation process begins with the study of iconography, using Panofsky's theory in analyzing the artefact of Yeh Pulu relief. It aims to reveal the concept of visual aesthetics, allegories and symbols existing in the subject of study (D'alleva, 2005: 22-23). The concepts being analyzed include the concepts of visual aesthetics, allegories and symbols which then became the basis for the contemporary painting creation. The first year of this research and painting creation is dedicated to reveal the visual aesthetic concept only. Meanwhile, in the second and the third year the focus respectively lies in the analysis of the concept of allegories and symbols existing in the

relief. The concept of visual aesthetics in question will be in the form of abstraction and description of the concept that became the foundation of the process of art work creation.

In summary, the research problems that can be formulated in the study on the creation of contemporary painting include the concept of visual aesthetics, the approach/process of creation, and the meaning generated from the works' visuals. The series of study, creation and presentation of the works were done to achieve the aims, which include revealing the heroic iconography-based aesthetic visual concept of Yeh Pulu relief, finding the approach/method of creation, and formulating the meaning of the work.

Method

The method employed in this study is a combination of field research and work creation. The field research, which includes the observation and the study of research subject, namely Yeh Pulu relief, located in Bedulu, Gianyar, is carried out as a preliminary process. Soon after the completion of that stage, preparation and the process of work creation is then commenced. Field research, especially related to further observations, recording and analysis of the research subject is continually conducted. Meanwhile, the process of the creation of art (contemporary painting), especially at the phase of creation of subject matter of the work takes place after the visual aesthetic concept is revealed.

The field research is part of the series of qualitative research employing Panofsky's iconography approach, with reference to the visual analysis of Yeh Pulu relief. According to Kirk and Muller, qualitative research stems from qualitative observation that naturally emphasizes on the quality aspect as it concerns with understanding, concepts, values and attributes inherent to the object of research (Kaelan, 2005: 5).

This iconography-based analysis, which refers to Panofsky's theory aims to reveal the concepts of visual aesthetics, allegories and symbols in the object of the study (D'alleva, 2005: 22-23). The first year is specially used to formulate the composition of the visual icons of painting, the images, techniques, and the pattern of representation. Panofsky divides the analysis of the image of artwork into three steps with the first one being the pre-iconography, which exposes the image formally, without reference and things other than the visual elements. The second step is the iconography that aims to understand the story as well as the characteristics of the image. The third one is the iconology to analyze the meaning related to the cultural and historical conditions surrounding the object of the study.

Iconography is also concerned with the analysis of the concepts of allegories and symbols of an image (D'alleva, 2005: 22-23).

Although in practice the three stages of analysis are used, this research emphasizes the practice of iconography. This is because at this stage, the visual aesthetics, allegories and symbols of an image are carefully analyzed to formulate potential cultural meanings of the image.

The method employed in art creation has the patterns as formulated by Sullivan in *Art Practice as Research* (2005), which involves the practice of visual understanding, by taking into consideration the medium, language, and context (124-127). In the practice of creating contemporary painting in the context of this research, the data analysis leads to the formulation of visual aesthetic concepts. Furthermore, the visual aesthetic analysis consists of three stages (Sullivan, 2005): medium exploration, identification of visual language and context relevant to the theme of the heroism in the everyday life.

Analysis

Thematically speaking, Yeh Pulu relief clearly reveals the heroism of the everyday life. Kempers (1977: 134-139) describes some traditional farming tools that possess fascinating visual meanings to be discussed, such as hoes, *tuwak* (liquor made of papyrus fruit), and objects carried on shoulder. The emergence of a variety of tools related to this agrarian livelihood indicates that what is showcased by the relief is the history of everyday life.

Meanwhile, the reference to the 'puppet figures' relief (Kempers, 1977: 134), is actually slightly inaccurate if it refers to puppet figures in Kamasan painting. Some human figures on Yeh Pulu relief look natural with realistic and athletic physical representation. In contrast, puppet figures tend to be ornamental, and appear to be less realistic if represented riding a horse, hunting animals, and doing other activities of the like.

A similar view suggests that Yeh Pulu relief configuration is almost realistic as Ramseyer (2002: 45) says that "the figure of a man riding a horse only wearing a piece of short cloth and a belt. His long hair touches his shoulders. He rides the horse without any saddle, and is seen to force his horse to run". This statement gives the impression that the scene on the relief was depicted in such great detail that the saddle was left out in the depiction, in order to show a dramatic scene of a prince about to hurry away spurring his

horse, clearly showing a realistic portrayal. Further, examining the work's visual it is clear that the figural depiction of the relief's subject comes even close to the normal human proportion, and the slightly taller figure is certainly very ideal to portray the horse rider's heroism in the scene.



Figure 1 One of the fragments of Yeh Pulu relief, showing a prince about to spur his horse, but he is hindered by the horse's tail that seems like it is suddenly pulled by a princess.

Another thing that shows the realistic figurative feature of Yeh Pulu relief is, among others, the proportion of the figure that is the size of an adult. If one stands near the relief, it will be obvious that the average height of the relief's subject is equal to the height of an adult. Likewise, the carving depicts the tendrils to look more like plant tendrils, rather than to be decorative patterns that are usually symmetrical in composition and static in pattern.

From the thematic or pre-iconographic point of view, this 25-meter long relief with an average height of 2 meters illustrates two sequences of narratives, namely a narrative inside the house grounds (interior narrative) and a narrative outside the house grounds (exterior narrative). The interior narrative includes fragments where it begins with a figure of a man extending greetings, a man carrying a crock on his shoulder, a figure of a princess, a figure of a priest (which looks very small), a figure of an elderly woman opening a door to a

house, a figure of a man carrying a hoe, a figure of a middle-aged woman, and a figure of a demon-faced man sitting up (like an ascetic).

The exterior narrative includes a fragment of a prince riding a horse, a fragment of a tiger poaching involving three people, a fragment of a man and a woman having a drink (indicated by a depiction of a pitcher with smoke), a fragment of two men shouldering their game (a wild boar), and a fragment of a man riding a horse with the horse's tail being pulled by a woman (presumably a princess). It can be seen that the horse tilts its head up as if something suddenly stops it as it is just getting ready to run fast. At the end of the relief, the final fragment shows a figure of Ganesha which is very simply sculptured, with no ornamentation or any crown detail. At the southern end, two sculptured hermitage caves are seen, with a size of about 2x2x1.5 meter.

Through the analysis of the narrative plot sequences, it can be explained that from the iconographic standpoint the relief depicts a narrative of an ordinary human's heroism, i.e. a heroism narrative that tells of everyday life, that affirms the code of conduct and human endeavors (livelihoods) in life. The code of conduct in this narrative lays out the rules for the way people communicate (indicated by the portrayal of a man extending his greetings and also the presence of a priest, an elderly woman behind the door of the house and also the drink treat). Then, concerning life endeavors this narrative reveals various practices in day-to-day life (indicated by the depiction of the crock bearer, the hoe bearer, the hunting scene, and also the romantic story). In short, the narrative touches on the matters inside and outside the house grounds.

The Process of Creating Contemporary Paintings

The process of creating artworks, in reference to the method of 'Art Practice as a Research' (Sullivan, 2005: 124-127), encompasses a process that refers to three stages, namely medium exploration, visual language, and relevant context. Medium exploration, which takes place at the same time as the field research exploration, is concerned with the choice of materials and tools relevant to the visual character of the relief. Medium exploration also touches on matters relating to artistic techniques. Meanwhile, relevant context refers to the meaning and function of each stage, where medium exploration is more functional in relation to artistic techniques, and then the theme and the approach of creation relates to the visual aesthetic character.

Visual language exploration relates to the identification of a visual subject matter creation approach. Based on the results of analysis of this research, the concept revealed is the heroism in the everyday world of ordinary people mingled with the palace life as the main theme. The theme is elaborated in the work's visual where five approaches/methods of contemporary art creation are found, namely: (a) *cutting* (imagining that Yeh Pulu relief is like a comic poster sheet that can then be freely cut out); (b) *coloring* (giving colors according to the artist's artistic wish); (c) *highlighting* (making a certain subject/scene/plot of the relief the center of attention); (d) *smashing* (collating fragments and scraps of the relief that have become scattered due to rock corrosion); (e) *drawing* (construction of the visual subject based on a drawing/line technique).



Figure 2. An artwork entitled 'Cavalry Force', 160x200 cm, ink & acrylic on canvas, 2017.

The creation process produces 15 paintings, each having a dimension of 160x200 cm, on a diverse medium, using a combination of acrylic and Chinese ink, as well as a ballpoint pen. The artworks are titled 'Gateway', 'Going Home', 'Build Rainbow', 'Cavalry Force', 'Escape', 'Bodies Flying in Universe', 'Hunting a Tiger', 'The Heroes', 'Scape of The Desire', 'Pray for Goddess', 'The King', 'The Power of Ganesha', 'The Shadow of Heroes', 'Wishing for Princess', and 'Escape'. These works together with the sketch works and

drawings on paper are then exhibited in a solo painting exhibition with the title *Citra Yuga: The Cavalry Iconography of Yeh Pulu Relief* in Bentara Budaya, Jakarta (1-8 August 2017).

The curator of the exhibition Fajar Arcana explained that the works presented in the exhibition to show the archaic can also be used as a metaphor for reading the social phenomena of today. The works in the Citra Yuga exhibition link or simply pair the relief's plot with the reflection of the everyday life in the past and at the present. This can be interpreted as an attempt to understand today, by carefully reading the historical genealogy of the past. In the heroism narrative, at least from what can be gleaned from Yeh Pulu relief which is worthy of being the entry point, to become a heroic figure of today is to become an ordinary, mundane figure (Arcana, 2017).

Meanwhile, in an exhibition review written by Nawa Tunggal in Kompas newspaper (Sunday, 6 August 2017), it is explained that the works that are based on the researches on Yeh Pulu relief point to the attempt to uncover the heroism of the ordinary people, for example the depiction of tiger hunting, which seems odd because of the manner of catching the beast in which the tiger's tongue and tail are pulled. There is a process of dramatization undertaken by artists in the past. Sharon Nadeem wrote an article which was published in The Jakarta Post (Friday, August 4, 2017) in which she states that the works in the Citra Yuga exhibition are an attempt to connect the past with the present. The appropriation of the past becomes the gateway to uncover today's phenomena.

Conclusion

In brief, it can be concluded that Yeh Pulu relief has two narrative plots (the interior and exterior narratives) which, from the iconographic viewpoint, depict the theme of the everyday world heroism. This heroism encompasses the code of conduct and livelihoods of the ordinary people combined with the royal palace life (through a depiction of a princess). In terms of visual characters, the figurations on the relief tend to be realistic, whereas the plant tendrils that serve as separators among the fragments give a more naturalistic impression rather than ornamental (as decorations).

The iconographic concept of the everyday world heroism is translated into the practice of creating contemporary paintings based on five approaches, namely *cutting*, *drawing*, *coloring*, *highlighting*, and *smashing*. The findings of these five approaches confirm that the paintings produced are contemporary art, since the visual element (the

subject matter) is not formed by a single artistic technique like in modernism. Also, the inclusion of fictitious iconography such as small human figures offset the presence of the figures or fragments of the relief (highlighting), making the generated visual language to have a contextual (present day) nature.

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Penerbit :



ISBN 978-602-61933-7-7

